

NECTAR Forum 2019

Record of discussion at the World Café-style session

At the NECTAR Forum 2019, early-career academics (ECAs) of ANU gathered to discuss issues and challenges affecting them and the skills and support they need. Part of this event was a 'World Café'-style discussion.

A World Café is a facilitated process that engages participants in short but meaningful conversations in a café-style setting. The discussions at the different tables are facilitated by a table host and participants move between the tables periodically.

At this event, ECAs deliberated on eight different topics. This is a record of the discussions as written by the table hosts and collated by NECTAR staff.

Table 1: Questions to the Provost/Executive on “nurturing ECAs to be second to none”

- Balancing research and teaching → 50/40/10 (teaching/research/service)
 - There is no clear metrics in place in most groups/areas. This becomes particularly challenging at the beginning of careers: What are the metrics to meet and how do these metrics contribute to career development? Supervisors often have no clue either.
 - Teaching/setting up a course – Is it as useful as publications?
 - Having a mentor during the PDR process (who is potentially present at PDR meeting) is helpful for getting objective oversight of expectations.
 - Research metrics: Guidelines seem less clear at ANU compared to other institutions.
 - Suggestion: Should there be a point system for expectations?
 - What are the key metrics for promotion? The existing metrics seem to change frequently.
 - Where can ECAs find guidelines for what is required?
- Are non-traditional research outputs adequately recognised?
- There should be a measure of “input” rather than 100% focus on “output”. How can outputs be tailored for each personal situation? This might lead to lack of clarity.
- There were a few suggestions to get the Research Offices to support ECAs.

- Second to none
 - What does this mean? Concerns were raised that this kind of wording can lead to non-collegial and toxic environment by creating a sense of competition between academics.
 - Who are the ECAs that we want to nurture? How do we pick them? From last year HDRs?
 - Is ANU moving from mass to elite? Do we only want a small number of PhDs?
- Executive needs to lobby government to create fairer work conditions. Undergrad student numbers are smaller, therefore there is less money coming in.
- How to foster everyone's potential in this environment?
 - Lessons to learn from industry: industry encourages teams to work together to lift the whole group up, support and encourage. Universities are increasingly based on competition and "cut throat".
 - When people leave/retire, no ECAs appear to be replacing them.
- How would you make ANU better, with a healthier culture?
 - The focus should be on "structural" more than "cultural" – people usually want to be collaborative.
 - If there's enough to go round (work, funding, positions) people will cooperate.
- HDR:
 - HDR supervision is inadequate. HDRs are unclear about expectations. If the supervisor is not involved, who takes over? Who is eligible for extra funding? Are there metrics for supervision?
- ANU is very top heavy, lots of money is spent on high level management.
- Suggestions:
 - Alternative funding models
 - Networks that are not siloed
 - Cross-disciplinary
 - New funding opportunities
 - New skill models.

Table 2: Questions to the Provost/Executive on transparency around finance and hiring at ANU

- Overall budgets – processes and transparency?
- Retention, careers?
- Professional staff – numbers, quality and services
 - Why are we aiming for (Go8, global, national and/or IARU) average numbers of professional staff rather than efficiency and/or services offered?
 - Access points are too high for practical feedback.
 - Who answer to unit problems?
- Research overheads:
 - 75% overhead for research consultancy agreements. How is research possible in this case?
 - Is standardisation against grant types being considered?
 - Who gets what?

Table 3: How can we address gender disparity in career progression?

- Lack of female leadership: Female academics cannot identify female role models in managerial positions.
- Glass ceiling phenomenon: Too many amazing early-career females, but not many in Professorial positions.
- Talent loss due to job insecurity and stress (which is very important for young females having/growing/planning a family).
- Job insecurity and unrealistic expectations are important reasons why people are leaving ANU specifically and academia in general.
- Lack of financial support for main carers (child-care is very expensive and sometimes not worth working).
- Females are not recognised for their emotional support within teams nor for their roles in house-keeping and organising team building activities (a few attendees mentioned that this takes a few hours a month and does play a huge role in others' job satisfaction).
- Breastfeeding and new mothers practical support is inadequate (e.g. one private room cannot support multiple expressing mothers).
- There is a “Boys club culture” in publishing and funding applications.

Table 4: Intersectionality – How can we improve equity for all ECAs?

- Comments on the excellence agenda and how this could be a barrier to entry and encourage bias and inequity.
 - Excellence should be used as a marketing tool and not used for the management of day-to-day activities.
 - University has a problem with the concept of intersectionality – exceptionality is hard to find in some areas; humanities.
 - How does ANU define excellence to not alienate intersectional persons?
- Visa issues – lower socioeconomic groups could have barriers to taking employment/ studies if fees were not paid by the University. Some consideration of fees would be appropriate.
- Teaching and course provision
 - Gender studies focused on European/ American issues.
 - Caribbean/ African/ Indigenous do not appear in course content/ design
 - Narrow focus of courses does not incorporate Indigenous studies and other nationalities => less scope for intersectional researchers. → If ANU increased the scope of courses they provide they could support research in this area and have a more diverse workforce and would be more equipped to transfer research into practice.
 - This could lead to an increase in the diversity of student cohort, i.e. cultural history courses opportunity to do a double degree.
- Training
 - Highlighted a need to train intersectional women to be supervisors and leaders
 - Currently only happening in gender studies which have a narrow focus on Western gender studies
 - Provide role models for Indigenous students etc. – lack of representation in this area.
 - Dealing with students
 - Teacher/ lecturer training i.e. helping students whose 1st language is not English
 - Safe space for students
 - Providing student services that are culturally reflective

- Training for dealing with intersectional students
 - Encourage ANU to reach out more. Lots of groups in this area were grass roots programs by individuals not ANU.
 - LGBTIQ+ ANU Ally program was a good start and expanding it to students was a great idea.
 - Looking at the training – contracted out to a company not designed for the academic area? Could bring in local LGBTIQ+ organisations i.e. Canberra network.
 - Program doesn't address the best way to teach as a LGBTIQ+ person i.e. whether/ when to disclose sexual orientation etc.
- Academic collaboration
 - Highlighted the silo nature of ANU research
 - Providing more opportunities to engage with other disciplines/ sharing ideas => interdisciplinary research
 - No space to do so.
- Diversity – ANU as the national university should reflect the diversity of Australia.
 - Promote diversity – multicultural diverse reflective of the Australian identity (expanding courses including Asian/ aboriginal sessions etc.)
 - Limited view of other cultures at the moment.

Table 5: How can we be more inclusive of casual sessional academic staff?

- Casualisation is not a new thing.
- It's okay to have casuals, just not to the extent we have now and because there are no jobs. A casual appointment suits the needs of some but overall it's exploiting the workforce.
- Casualisation particularly a problem in HASS disciplines. Contributing factor is that the money is in STEM. HASS disciplines are generally underrepresented.
- PhD candidates are amongst those exploited as casual staff → union only represents staff not students.
- There needs to be more transparency around the fact that an academic career often means casual/short-term contracts. Supervisors need to better prepare their students/staff for this.
- What is the University's purpose? → Service to community. The University needs to "produce" graduates who make a difference in society → this means that they have to invest in teaching.
- ANU is a research-intensive university and this is used to market its teaching as excellent, but delivery is cheap (through casuals).
- The University undervalues students and teaching. → ANU needs to value teaching. Casual teaching staff deliver teaching excellence → could be used to raise awareness.
- People/supervisors who are aware of the issues that come with casualisation, e.g. through their own experience, are a lot more supportive of casual staff. → How can we increase awareness in everyone, not just in people who have experienced casual working conditions?
- Implications of casual appointments:
 - Only paid a certain amount of assumed hours, not for the actual hours
 - No one speaks about the conditions, there is no representation and no accounting on how many casuals there are etc.
 - Most of the tools available to staff are not available to casuals.
 - There's no representation.
 - No sick leave, no annual leave, no pay during teaching breaks.
 - There's no consistency if teaching is done by casuals, courses need to be re-developed all the time.

Questions to the Executive

- Students are a major income source for ANU. A significant part of teaching at ANU is done by casuals. This casualisation bears a risk for student experience. How will ANU explain this to the government? (This questions was asked to the Provost at the Roundtable session.)
- How can casuals get paid the same rates as staff on contracts?
- When is the University going to prioritise human needs over other needs like infrastructure?
- When is the University going to demand government to give back the money they took away and how are they going to invest it?
- When is the University going to value contributions from the HASS disciplines?
- Casuals are expected to deliver excellence in teaching. How will the University ensure that research does not fall behind for these individuals?

Ideas to address the issue

- Casuals and their contribution to the University should be acknowledged in the University's annual report.
- Professional development opportunities at ANU should be open to casual staff.
- The University needs to re-calibrate their view on who is included in "staff".
- Raise awareness that there is a policy which says that casuals can request a contract after certain criteria are met.
- ANU to support its casuals to find employment outside the University (part-time alongside the ANU role), e.g. through DFAT.

Main take-home messages

- Supervisors who are aware of the conditions casuals have to deal with, mostly due to their own experiences as casuals, are more supportive of their casual staff. → Raising awareness in those without this experience should help our efforts to build a support base/make allies for more concrete steps.
- There is a lack of transparency around the academic career path which is often based on casual/short-term contracts, e.g. PhD graduates are often surprised that they are offered casual contracts only and not permanent employment.

Table 6: How can we make ECAs ready for careers outside academia?

- Difficulty: competing against friends for small number of tenured jobs
- All ECAs have impressive skillset – how do we deal with that when people are intimidated by non-academic environments, e.g. public service?
- How to identify transferable skills and how to pitch CV to a non-academic audience?
- Secondments – are internships an answer?
- Role of supervisors/ ANU – do they have the right training/ information/ experience to advise on careers outside academia?
- University and private sector inventing new positions as yet unimagined – what are they? Practicing research in private sector? Doesn't that speak to impact?
- How might ANU support ECAs on pathways embedded in industry or public sector?
- How can the application of research and support for ECAs combine with Strategic Plan focus on impact and research?
- How can ANU support closer integration of academics and industry/ private practice?
- How can we utilise existing resources at ANU to better integrate with existing resources? Is there potential for seed funding for innovation projects?
- Where do you even start looking for careers outside academia? Academic careers based around project whereas professional careers based around different criteria?
- How do we promote idea in Colleges that careers even exist outside academia? How can supervisors develop these skills?
- Needs to be better integration of academic side and service side of ANU to provide info to ECAs?
- Is there any activity that supervisors need to do with students to help support? What tools do supervisors need to be able to talk about career planning? Eg industry what strategies already in place for exterior connections can be applied to aspects of supervision?
- How do I take research skills and demonstrate that I can do something else? Need exposure to other experiences and how to frame these? Possibility of some form of program or recognition during PhD/ ECAs to explore academic options?

- A lot of Level A/ B or people who have done just a few postdocs drop out of academia – how do we retain them? How do we support them if they choose to leave?
- Is there a possibility of integrating existing academic and service resources to provide a program/ training at no cost?
- What is Provost's view on importance/ role of ECAs?
- Is there responsibility for universities/ supervisors to be realistic to HDRs about academic career realism?
- Should industry internships be built into PhD programs?
- Specific programs for ECAs on career development activities (not students), e.g. writing CVs etc?
- Should career planning to be built into PhDs? Eg PDRs etc? Supervisors to be accountable for career goals? Eg if going down academic path make expectations re publishing etc compared to someone who wants to go into public service?

Question to the Provost, asked at the Roundtable session

How can we work with ANU to support career development outside academia? What resources/ supervisorial support can we expect? What concrete steps is ANU taking in this space? How does ANU specifically support career development outside academia?

Table 7: How can we improve research and workplace culture for ECAs?

Concerns and challenges

- Concerns around HDR: poor supervision (no expertise in area, poor communication, inadequate understanding around expectations, roles and responsibilities of candidate and panel members), lack of transparency around funding, what candidates can expect, broader research sector issues such as ERA (unless involved in PARSA or you happen to have a good supervisor). Often feel as though they are stuck in the middle: not involved in staff meetings, don't feel like 'real' staff.
- Structural and practical problems: poor record-keeping, strict contracts, outdated or limited mailing lists (often exclude casual sessional staff, Visiting Fellows) mean interdisciplinary collaboration is difficult. ANU processes extremely opaque and confusing, lack of joint contracts dissuade collaboration.
- Culture is entrenched: people who have been here a long time see no problem with the way things are, no incentive or reason to change them, while it can be difficult to know how to report or address problems.

Potential solutions

- HDR supervision development: introduction of new candidate-supervisor agreement should help to provide more clarity and structure to HDR programs. HDRs and ECAs should be invited to staff meetings where possible for professional development and greater transparency. Challenges should be acknowledged: through help with publishing workshops, meetings, conferences, perhaps have senior ECA champions at each School.
- Improved local mentoring and networking: introduce local mentoring programs based on personality profiles for HDRs (based on both skills and career progression), have a register for local networking events.
- Research skills for ECAs: workshops for ECAs on writing, conferences, networking, funding applications, contract negotiations, knowing when you're ready to submit grant, clarity about what ECAs can expect from Research Offices, career development beyond academia. Funding for networking and skills development beyond academia.
- Foster more interdisciplinary research and teaching: team teaching and pastoral care support, remove barriers, funding for ECAs to collaborate on interdisciplinary research.
- Positive research culture structurally embedded: should not be dependent or concentrated with one senior person (perhaps a rotating leadership, no long-term appointments, mentoring more junior academics to take over).

- Reduce funding uncertainty: offer bridging salary ANU-wide for those awaiting external 2nd post-docs or fellowships, partnerships with US, European universities for fellowships.
- Use of facilities should be free for ECAs.

Key questions

- How can we capitalise on strengths in individual Schools and Colleges across the University in terms of processes, collaboration, funding, career development and networking?
- Should we be continuing with 'business as usual' or looking beyond the horizon in terms of workplace culture?

Table 8: Supporting new skill acquisition and facilitating interdisciplinary research

This table focused on the new skills and tools that PhDs and ECAs may want to acquire to support their research and the challenges they face. Overall most of them reported that they had been attracted to ANU as a place to study/work because of its support of interdisciplinary research and innovative and path-breaking approaches to research. Some expressed feelings of uncertainty and frustration with their actual experiences, i.e. they felt support was there 'on paper' but not obvious in practical day-to-day support. Others were positive about their experiences, and had some great ideas about how these areas could be supported more efficiently, or offered suggestions of approaches that had worked within their own schools and centres.

Skill acquisition happens with people

We chatted with each group about the fact that acquiring new skills, methods, and diversifying one's 'research toolkit' was often a matter of developing supportive networks and interpersonal relationships. While research training sessions run by various areas (library, Research Training) were useful up to a point. We discussed the challenge of acquiring niche, specialist skills that won't necessarily warrant a general workshop and are often learned through meeting the right person. This was especially true for people interested in using tools and methods that were not common in their own disciplines (say a historian who wants to learn how to make maps, or a computer scientist who wants to understand narrative theory to train an AI, etc).

Possible actions

- Ongoing support for training via formal channels (especially ECAs as they often don't have access to training in the same way as PhDs).
- Targeted networking events or skills exchange (meet a data scientist, Python user group etc). One participant said they had organised a data science morning tea where people could bring their questions and problems to a friendly social space, and one where they knew people were open to being asked to offer help and advice. This avoided the fear that you might be 'bothering someone who is busy'.
- An example from Melbourne Uni is their digital tools showcase <https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/researcher-connect-the-digital-tools-skills-showcase-tickets-67401221869>
- The Software Carpentry model was also mentioned <https://software-carpentry.org/>
- And ResBaz <https://resbaz.github.io/resbaz2019/sydney/>

- *As an aside the Centre for Digital Humanities Research could support some of this digital-focused training, we just lack capacity to organise and teach it as we only have 3 staff, but we have a space and a network to draw on.*

Building research relationships

Support for building relationships for cross-disciplinary research also came up. Again it was noted that ANU supports inter-disciplinary research (Cross college grants, Grand Challenges etc). But for ECAs and PhDs it was often difficult to know how to find people to work with on their ideas, or to build meaningful research relationships outside of their own areas. ANU Colleges can be hard to penetrate and ‘cold-emailing’ people didn’t always feel like the appropriate approach. Making interdisciplinary connections can be challenging and it was reported that developing relationships takes time (have to make friends first before you can pitch the research plan). Also ECAs and PhD reported that they felt there was often not support, or not perceived to be support for experimentation, failure and risk taking needed to do bold new research. They were fearful of the time required to train and experiment would be seen as time wasted.

Possible actions

- It was reported that cross-College seminar series are useful (eg ‘Conversations across the Creek’ run by the Humanities Research Centre).
- Cross-disciplinary spaces like the ANU MakerSpace.
- One suggestion was an ‘ask an expert’ database for PhDs and ECAs (and everyone). It was noted that sometimes researcher pages are a bit general and impersonal and it would be good to be able to find people who were open to collaboration requests. Also that experts are not just Professors but might be people with a skill in using certain software, in languages, data management.
- Skill mapping exercise to find out where expertise sits across the different Colleges.

Grand Challenges and finding pots of money

Participants said it was hard to know where the money was! There was a high profile for ‘big things’ like the Grand Challenges (the Rolls Royce) and the DECRA/ARC grants but as an ECA they felt they lacked the track record and support to be competitive. There was a desire for more support to build the track record necessary for these. Is there money for seed funding to get a project started, support building publication and outputs so that chances of success were increased.

Possible actions

- Improved ways to discover what money was available and what it could be used for, something like a searchable grants database (the ANU website is hard to search at the best of times and often research offices just sent very long emails with too much information, too infrequently). Some felt that also knowing what a range of Colleges provided would be useful, i.e. if a computer scientist knew that CASS offered cross-college grants they could approach someone there about an idea that crossed over the two disciplines.)
- Training for building up to an ambitious project, for example helping ECAs to start planning for a DECRA 2-3 years before they actually apply.